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ABSTRACT

American society is experiencing a sex-role revolution. This revolution is transforming the roles and status of men and women in American society. These changes appear to be the result of the rapid social changes sweeping the country. While men and women may be freer to follow their desires and aspirations, this revolution has also produced new problems and anxieties. Various reasons can be found for the changing roles of the father in American society. The traditional role of the man as the "good provider" is changing. The role of the father in the socialization of his children appears to be an issue of great importance and interest in our society. Some studies consider the father's role as "matricentric," in that these studies often focus on the mother's perception of the role of the father in the family, rather than focusing on the father's perception. Sociocultural changes in the United States provide explanations as to why fathers are more involved with their children. As a result of our mobile society, there is a need for the father to provide support in areas that were traditionally filled by extended family, long-standing friends, and neighbors. The changing role of the father is looked in the context of four theories: The Individual Development Theory; Cognitive Dissonance Theory; the Social Judgment Theory; and Attribution Theory. (BHK)

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Changing Role of the Father in the United States

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Abstract

American society is experiencing a sex-role revolution. This revolution is transforming the roles and status of men and women in our society. In recent years, these changes have been brought about by the rapid social changes that are sweeping the country. Both men and women are freer to follow their own desires and aspirations. The sexual revolution also had produced new problems and anxieties.

The traditional roles ascribed to men by the society, such as good provider, is slowly changing. The role of the emergent father is clearly inconsistent with conceptions of masculinity or fatherhood that emphasize achievement, status, nonemotionality, and refraining from traditional feminine activities.

Changing Role of the Father in the United States

In traditional perspective, a father's role is to provide for his family so that the mother can take care of the children (**Bowlby, 1951**). According to this view, fathers provided companionship and emotional support to their spouses and had little to do with their children. Writers such as **English** (1954) describe how the father's role has been viewed.

> Traditionally, Father has been looked on as the breadwinner. In times past, so much of his time and energy was used in this role that at home he was thought of as taciturn and stern, albeit kind. He was respected but feared by his children who never learned to know him very well. He accepted the fact that he earned the money and Mother cared for the home and raised the children. (p. 323)

Generally, "fathering" has conformed to the social ideals and realities of the 1940's and 1950's. At that time, relatively few women were in the labor force and only a small percentage were mothers with little children. Accordingly, mothers stayed home and took care of the children and fathers went out to work. The role of the father was breadwinner and conformed to the social values

of the society. However, even at that time, the norms of the American society were changing to allow different patterns of childrearing.

Today, the role of father in the socialization of his children has become an issue of great importance and interest in our society. Some studies have considered the father's role as "matricentric" **(Lamb, 1981)**, in that these studies most often focused on the mother's perception of the role of the father in the family, rather than directly focusing on the father. In some cases, they considered the impact of father absence on children's development.

Sociocultural changes in the United States provide explanations as to why fathers are becoming more involved with their children and spouses. Since the typical American family moves more often and has fewer long-standing neighborhood friends, the fathers need to share responsibilities of childrearing and housekeeping chores. At present, more fathers seek emotional closeness with their children as part of the men's movement toward fuller fatherhood, and as a reaction to the concept of the purely instrumental role of family provider.

Why do fathers want to change their traditional roles as family providers? What do fathers and children actually

do together? what influences a father's involvement? And finally, does the father's involvement influence the child's development?

The writer will try to focus on the reasons for the changing roles of the father in American society.

Individual Development: Self-Concept

Most men seem to change profoundly when they become fathers by identifying themselves as fathers. It is a sign of increased differentiation and a new aspect of self. The change is an integration of "father" with already-established aspects of one's self-concept **(Bronstein & Cowan, 1988)**. This integration is reached only by grappling with conflicting sets of demands. In the beginning, before they became fathers, they do not realize that home and work life often require different personal qualities. As men they believe that they should be independent, masculine and self-centered. By contrast, new fathers usually need to be or are aware of the needs of others and a need to develop empathy and caring qualities. Thus, a new adjustment is required to meet new demands.

Self-Esteem.

Many new fathers assume that personal efforts to change roles can lead to increased adaptation (internal control). For some, the fact that they became fathers

constituted proof of control by sharing in the power to create a new life, and often a new generation in their family line.

The evaluative aspect of the self-concept could be summarized under the general heading of self-esteem **(Harter, 1985)**. If a father begins to resolve the tasks and challenges posed by major life transitions, he might evaluate himself more positively. On the other hand, men's ' aspirations for themselves tend to grow exponentially once they become new fathers. What was once an acceptable way of life or level of achievement can now become cause for self-recrimination and bring role changes. A high level of self-esteem should not be regarded as mature unless it is based in part on demonstrable psychological and social competence.

As men become fathers, generally, they are able to step back from their involvement in day-to-day events to take a broader view of their life. In the cognitive realm, this perspective-taking ability **(Piaget & Inhelder, 1967)** sometimes leads to significant revisions in their philosophy of life, new ways of making sense of where they had come from, and where they are heading. In the affective realm, a broader perspective sometimes helps men

to avoid marital tensions when new family demands seem endless.

New fathers are often anxious. Our society expects them to be strong and, often, they worry that talking about their doubts and fears would upset their spouses. Many new fathers feel that having a child brought them more in touch with their feeling and helped them learn how to be more comfortable with self-disclosure. In some cases, the pride of being a new father seem to enable men to subordinate their own needs and feelings to the service of their family.

Attribution Theory

The changing role of father in America can be explained by the application of attribution theory. Attribution theory is an explanation of how people organize their behavior and make it meaningful; it focuses especially on the attribution of causes, motives, abilities, and predispositions **(Lindzey, Hall & Thompson, 1975)**.

The question of how men make judgments in a social context involves many issues. In particular, there is a question of how men perceive one another on the basis of observed behavior and the context in which that behavior

occurs. Attribution theory is concerned explicitly with how men try to find appropriate **causal** explanations for one another's behavior and, more generally, for any event in their social environment.

Heider (1958) assumes that individuals are motivated to view their social environment as predictable and, hence controllable, and that they apply the same kind of logic to the prediction of social events as they do to the prediction of physical events; they look for the necessary and sufficient conditions for such events to occur (phenomenal causality). Such conditions may either be situational or impersonal factors, external to the person whose behavior one is trying to predict and explain, or factors regarded as internal to the person, such as his ability or personality. In Heider's words, "Attributions in terms of impersonal and personal causes, and with the latter, in terms of intent, are everyday occurrences that determine much of our understanding of and reaction to our surroundings" (1958: 16).

Jones and Davis (1965) propose a model of how individuals make inferences about a person's dispositions or character, which they explain as follows:

> It is assumed that the perceiver typically starts with the overt action of another; this is

> the grist for his cognitive mill. He then makes certain decisions concerning ability and knowledge which will let him cope with the problem of attributing particular intentions to the actor. The attribution of intentions, in turn, is a necessary step in the assignment of more stable characteristic to the actor. (p. 222)

Ability and knowledge are relevant in that it is assumed that father must be seen as knowing that his action could have the consequences produced, and being able to produce these consequences intentionally by the action, before an attribution can be made to his intentions. When the perceiver infers that the father's behavior is "in character", this is termed a "correspondent" inference. For example, if the father shows aggressive behavior, the most "correspondent" inference is that this is because of the father's aggressiveness, which also involves the assumption that the father intended to act aggressively.

Several studies **(Pruett, 1983, 1985)** describe fathers whose involvement in their children's lives varies widely. This is a part of the changing role of fathers who want to get involved in the welfare of their families by accommodating or adjusting their lives so that their spouses and children will accept their new roles.

What is the nature of fatherhood today? It would seem to be a role in transition, from an older, traditional model of the hardworking father responsible for the family's welfare, to a parent who is personally and emotionally involved in the day-to-day rearing of his children. Patterns of fathering in American culture are changing dramatically. The traditional role of breadwinner is no longer the preferred model and men and their families have new challenges, choices and roles.

There are studies which have looked at attributions of responsibility for behavior (**Walster, 1966**). Walster states that the more serious the consequences of a person's behavior, the more likely it is that he will be seen as "responsible", even if these consequences were unintended. The same hypothesis applies to new fathers and consequently changes the role of father in our society.

Many fathers are motivated to avoid blaming themselves for accidental occurrences, particularly if the outcomes are severe--defensive attribution hypothesis. As a consequence, we have to concentrate on variables directly relevant to defensive attribution hypothesis, i.e., outcome severity and personal relevance of the situation to the father (**Shaver, 1970**).

The central idea of attribution theory--that interpersonal descriptions are the outcome of an attempt to explain observable behavior--applies just as much to the descriptions one may make about oneself as those one may make about others. Self-attribution should be subjected to the same criteria of consensus and distinctiveness, and influenced by the same kind of trade-off relationship between internal and external factors, as are important in the attribution of characteristics to other people: In the case of fathers, we have to be concerned with differences between how fathers attribute characteristics to themselves and others. Fathers are less inclined to see one's own behavior in terms of underlying personality traits, and more inclined to see oneself as responding to circumstantial factors. In this way, the role of fathers are changing rapidly.

How do fathers explain the achievement, or lack of achievement, shown by themselves and others in changing the traditional roles? If one succeeds, is it because the role change was easy, because the father was lucky, because of one's superior skills, or because of extra effort on the part of the father? The answer is likely to affect how much personal credit one should be given for such success, and whether one would expect such success to be repeated.

The question of whether success or failure in changing the traditional roles should be internally or externally attributed is basic to social learning theory approaches to personality (Rotter, Chance and Phares, 1972). Fathers differ in the extent to which they expect "reinforcements" to occur, as a function of their own behavior (internal control), or as a function of luck or forces beyond their personal control (external control).

Application of Cognitive Dissonance Theory to Changing Role of Fathers.

The main tenet of cognitive dissonance theory is that people are motivated to maintain consistency among cognitive elements (e.g., beliefs, attitudes) (Festinger, 1957). Social psychologists have used cognitive dissonance theory as a framework for understanding a wide variety of situations involving attitude change and behavior. People are more relaxed when their attitudes and perceptions of their own behavior are in harmony with one another. When there is inconsistency between cognitive elements, a state of dissonance exists, involving mental tension and discomfort (Fazio & Cooper, 1983).

In our society, new fathers are motivated to reduce dissonance and to attain a state of consonance. Contra-

dictions among important male roles produce more dissonance than inconsistency among relatively unimportant ones. The more cognitive elements that are contradicted, the greater the magnitude of tension or dissonance.

When dissonance is experienced, a father is motivated to change cognitive organization to reduce tension and bring about consonance. There are a number of strategies available to a father for avoiding or reducing dissonance. One way a father can reduce dissonance is to change the importance of the conflicting cognitions **(Kassarjian & Cohen, 1965)**. For example, if planning to take care of a child produces dissonance, a father might reduce the importance of the decision by believing that parenthood is more important than the traditional male role of just being the breadwinner. He may also acquire new beliefs or roles as a way of reducing the contradictions.

The most obvious form of dissonance reduction is to change one of the contradictory cognitions. A father can change his traditional male role by adopting the new emerging androgynous role. When freely chosen behavior is inconsistent with previously held beliefs, dissonance is created and the person is motivated to change one or more behaviors to reduce cognitive conflict. The result is typically a change in attitudes in the direction of the

counterattitudinal behavior. It is usually more difficult to change a belief associated with a behavior than to modify an attitude that is largely evaluative. It is well established that behaviors predict attitudes better than attitudes predict behaviors.

Application of Social Judgment Theory to Changing Role of Fathers.

How much fathers will change their attitudes in response to other members' attempts to influence role change may depend on where they presently stand on the issue of fatherhood. According to social judgment theory, attitude change depends on how fathers evaluate a persuasive communication within the context of their existing attitude structures **(Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall, 1965)**.

Fathers may perceive information that seems to be in substantial agreement with their attitudes as even more similar than it really is; they may perceive contrary information as more in disagreement than it really is. Attempts at persuasion falling within the target father's latitude of acceptance usually will produce attitude change in the intended direction. If the persuasive communication is within the latitude of rejection, then it will be

unsuccessful (**Bagly, 1981**). It seems that most of the information relating to change of role falls within the latitude of acceptance and hence, will bring role change in fathers.

Conclusion

At present, discussion of fathering is becoming more fashionable. Social scientists and others have begun a long overdue assessment of the problems and possibilities of the role of fathers in the households. Increasingly, fathers are being urged to participate in the lives of their children and assume responsibility for their upbringing. Changes in social norms which foster re-evaluation of fathering and the relationship between father and child, are being accepted by our modern society.

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Author's Notes

I interviewed 15 fathers who indicated that they have changed their traditional roles as breadwinners. Wives in five families were interviewed to ascertain whether they perceive any changes in the role of fathers. Five family roles for which expectations were analyzed were childcare, housework, money management, and income earning. The first two are traditionally considered to be in the wife's domain and the second two in the husband's. Participants were asked to indicate whether they thought each of these four family roles should be carried out entirely or mostly by themselves, by both partners equally, or mostly or entirely by their spouses.

The results of the interviews are incorporated into the body of the paper.